



THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Annotation: Vocabulary is considered to be a cardinal part of every language since it is the basis of all languages. Vocabulary is as raw building blocks that we can use to express our thoughts and ideas, share information, understand others and grow personal relationships. This article analyses the importance of vocabulary in learning a language, specifically English. Information about types of vocabulary is also given in the article that can be helpful for every language explorer.

Key words: active vocabulary, passive vocabulary, oral vocabulary, print vocabulary, receptive vocabulary, academic words, everyday words

Vocabulary is commonly defined as “all the words known and used by a particular person”. Knowing a word, however, is not as simple as merely being able to recognize or use it.”¹ A person’s vocabulary is the set of words within a language that are familiar to that person. A vocabulary usually develops with age, and serves as a useful and fundamental tool for communication and acquiring knowledge. Vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas, and content together making comprehension accessible for one and all. Words are the starting point. Without words, no one would be able to talk about people, places, or things, about actions, relations, or states. Therefore, acquiring an extensive vocabulary is one of the largest challenges in learning a language. “...knowing a word is not all-or-nothing proposition; it is not the case that one either knows or does not know a word. Rather, knowledge of a word should be viewed in terms of the extent or degree of knowledge that people can possess.” Beck & McKeown, 1991.

Vocabulary learning is the important aspect in learning a foreign language, therefore students will improve much if they learn more words and expressions. As linguist David Wilkins (in Thornbury 2002:13) says that vocabulary learning is very important. “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” Thus vocabularies are the flesh of a language while grammar is the skeleton.

There are types of vocabulary regarding to their received way: oral vocabulary, print vocabulary, receptive vocabulary. Oral vocabulary includes those words that we recognize and use in listening and speaking. Print vocabulary includes those words that we recognize and use in reading and writing. Receptive vocabulary includes words that we recognize when we hear or see them.² Receptive vocabulary is typically larger than

¹ Beck, I., & McKeown, M. (1991). Conditions of vocabulary acquisition. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research*, Vol. 2, pp. 789–814). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

²<https://www.mikemcmahon.info/vocab.htm#:~:text=Oral%20vocabulary%20includes%20those%20words,two%20forms%2C%20receptive%20and%20productive>



productive vocabulary, and may include many words to which we assign some meaning, even if we do not know their full definitions and connotations- or use them ourselves as we speak and write. (Kamil & Hiebert, in press)

Vocabulary is divided into two according to its usage. Active vocabulary refers to the words one already knows understands and uses in a language. Knowing the precise meaning of the word, how to use that word in the right context, its spelling, and pronunciation active vocabulary differs from passive vocabulary. Active vocabulary is mainly used in communication and it is small in range than passive vocabulary. On the contrary, passive vocabulary refers to words whose meanings can be understood when appears in writing or speech, but one does not confidently use this type of vocabulary due to not being fully conversant with them. Passive vocabulary is not used in communication regularly, and it is larger in quantity than active vocabulary.

So, here is the question how to make your passive vocabulary go on the active list. Having a huge passive vocabulary is a thing that helps you to understand reading texts and a lot of speeches. When however you do not have enough words in order to speak fluently, you may want to usher a few hundreds of those idle words into your active list. Here is how to do it.

The first thing to stick in mind is never forget that you're doing it already. To start with, just keep on learning the language as you have already started to. If you are able to say a few sentences, it is a clear proof that you have already started to build your active vocabulary. You just need to go on. A language is a huge jigsaw puzzle that's why it is important not to immensely and one should just enjoy finding the right spots for a few more pieces and then a few more. The second important aspect to consider is translating. In order to speak a language well, you need to be able to speak without first translating the words in your head. However, translating is an intermediate step you need to go through before you are so used to saying the words that they come up without prior effort.

Another thing is that, the native speaker with whom you are going to speak is always going to have a bigger vocabulary than you, so your understanding needs to be of a higher level than your speaking. Furthermore, in any language, even your own, you usually spend more time listening than you do speaking. You have got to understand what people are saying around you.

What do ESL teachers often do in classrooms? They encourage people to speak, and talk correctly right from the beginning. But beginner learners have no context, no familiarity with the language. It just becomes a matter of rote cramming of information that is relatively meaningless. It's embarrassing, if you can't say what you want. This is true. If, however, you at least understand what the person is saying, if you have a large passive vocabulary, you're going to feel more comfortable and more confident. This gives you more time to think, and reduces the pressure on you, so that you can try to use, try to activate, some of your passive vocabulary. This passive vocabulary will be activated once



you start to speak more. At some point you have to speak, and speak a lot. However, it is amazing how much you can learn just through a very consistent program of listening and reading. Eventually, however, you have to activate it through lots of speaking.

In the initial stage of your listening and reading program, it's important to listen to the same limited material over and over because you can't even, at first, tell where one word ends and the next word begins. You have to allow your brain to get used to the language. However, in my case, after a month or two, I listen less often to the same material. I tend to do more extensive reading and listening, moving on to new material sooner, because I want to cover lots of vocabulary.

How many words can you more or less recognize when you see them or hear them in a given context? Even if you are helped by the context, it still counts because all of these words you're going to see again and again. If they matter to you, if they're important, they'll come up again and again. If you are listening and reading in an extensive way, they'll keep coming up. You'll see them in different contexts and you'll gradually get a better sense of what they mean. You don't have to nail down a word or phrase the first time you encounter it. When you are ready to speak, and as you speak more and more, the vocabulary will activate naturally. The idea that, as you start into a language, you're going focus on trying to speak the language, to me is simply nonsense from a language-learning efficiency point of view. It may be what people want to do. Perhaps that is so. But then most people are not that successful at language learning. Maybe it is because they can speak but don't understand very well. This makes it difficult to have a meaningful conversation.

Some people simply want to be able to say hello and give the impression that they speak the language. If that is the case, then to focus on a few key sentences and phrases is probably quite useful. However, if the goal is to be able to participate comfortably in conversations, or understand what people are saying around you in the workplace, if the goal is to gain that kind of comprehension, then you have to focus on your passive vocabulary. It is not said that you have to know every word in the dictionary, but you need a substantial vocabulary, and it doesn't matter whether you only count words as word families or whether you count every occurrence of the word the way we do at LingQ. There are people who read very well and can't speak well. But people who read well and understand well when listening are eventually going to be able to speak well. If they don't speak well yet, it's because they haven't spoken enough. But if they decide to go and speak with that kind of a grasp of the language based on passive vocabulary, they will very quickly become good active users of the language.

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